

“It’s All from One Big Pot”: Booya as an Expression of Community

Anne R. Kaplan

Libeled as “the goulash of the working class” and lauded as “the most nutritious life-sustaining stew around these parts,”¹ booya is both the name of a food and the boisterous community event at which it is consumed. Churches, clubs, volunteer fire companies, and neighborhood associations host annual booyas as fundraisers.² Making booya is always an undertaking of gargantuan proportions. A typical recipe for about 300 gallons, for example, calls for 300 pounds of beef bones, 150 pounds of chicken, 100 pounds of garlic, 3 pounds of pickling spice, 10 pounds of salt, 17 gallons canned tomatoes, 9 gallons each of canned peas, green beans, creamed corn, and whole-kernel corn, 100 pounds of oxtails, 300 pounds of potatoes, 100 pounds of celery, 75 pounds of carrots, 2 pounds of parsley, 3–4 pounds of allspice, 80 ounces of Worcestershire sauce, and 10 pounds of pepper. This does not include the secret seasonings, which are a major component of every booya recipe. “Exotic” tastes, however, are frowned upon, and no single flavor should dominate the finished product. Making booya that everyone will like is the goal.³

On the surface booya (the food and the event) bears some resemblance to a number of other traditional foodways. People familiar with Kentucky burgoo point out at least superficial similarities in the recipes and note that both booya and burgoo are made in large quantity, are usually consumed in public, and are the subject of familiar jokes about the disappearance of neighborhood pets, galoshes, bowling pins, and the like.⁴ The setting, attendance patterns, and accompanying entertainments at most booyas are similar to those of midwestern fundraising food events such as corn feeds and church bazaars. Yet booya stands in a class by itself, distinguished not only by the food but also by certain traditions: the way the

basic recipe is handed down, the secrecy of the vital seasonings, methods of preparation, and specialized gender and age roles. Not all booyas, of course, are the same; as with any living tradition, there is ample latitude for variation. Although the tradition is limited to particular neighborhoods of a few cities or small towns, mostly in Minnesota, specific booyas clearly bear the marks of their makers. In fact, making, selling, and eating booya can be a powerful expression of community on several levels. One could say that the pattern for a booya exists in the public domain as a generic tradition.⁵ But as a group brews the food and hosts the event over years—often decades—the tradition is interpreted and elaborated; it is personalized. The group comes to view booya as its own tradition, a food and an event that helps focus and express those salient values and facets of identity, such as ethnicity, occupation, or neighborhood, that the group uses to define itself. In the end, booya (the food) becomes a badge of identity while the process of making it models or recreates community structure.

Two intrinsic aspects of the tradition help explain this symbolic process: the nature of fundraisers in general and the distribution of the booya tradition in particular. Both of these factors operate as givens; they are the backdrop before which every booya is enacted. Their interaction creates a complex sense of community that is both inclusive and exclusive.

Booya is unquestionably meant to be a social event, where the focus is on eating, drinking, playing games, and talking. Viewed from the top down, all who attend are participating in a community event and sharing the experience. But the underlying purpose is to raise money, and a fundraiser, by nature, creates insider-outsider distinctions among participants. Some people gather early and donate their time to prepare food for a specific cause; others come later to buy the food, thereby supporting the cause. Not only does booya comprise hosts and paying guests, then, but some customers will benefit from the sales, while others will get only a bowl of booya and perhaps a feeling of satisfaction in return. Yet the monetary success of the event depends on the smooth interaction of the sellers and buyers who are, on a social level, almost always friends and neighbors. Thus, the principle at work is one of inclusion-exclusion; “group-within-a-group” and insider-outsider distinctions are both created and integrated at a booya.

Likewise, the push-pull of inclusion-exclusion is at work in defining an ever more specific sense of community among people who participate in the entire booya tradition. All those who belong to the generic universe of booya feel a sense of camaraderie that comes from sharing specialized knowledge and experience. It is difficult for a total outsider to gain access to the tradition: one almost has to know about booya to learn more about it. Unlike more descriptive titles for fundraisers such as “corn feed,” “bean

feed,” or “cake walk,” the name itself tells one nothing.⁶ Booyas are traditionally advertised by way of posters in neighborhood businesses and a banner at the park where the event is held. Poster text, however, is sparse, but this fact in itself is revealing. Often the cook’s name appears along with the sponsoring organization’s, the date, and park name—but no time or specific place. While this information might not get a stranger to the right place at the right time, it does imply a tight sense of community where one man’s name—one cook’s reputation—means enough to be advertised. Actually, the posters serve mostly as a memory jog. Most insiders learn of upcoming booyas because they belong to the sponsoring group, or by word of mouth from friends.

But within the unity of *cognoscenti* are many rival factions, for booya has been adapted and then further refined by regional, occupational, religious, ethnic, and neighborhood groups. Thus, while St. Paul booya makers as a community might compare themselves favorably to those from northern Minnesota, within St. Paul there is competition among firemen and church and neighborhood groups as to whose booya is best.

The nature of the food would seem to limit its consumption to members of an in-group who know and trust the cook. In her study of American food habits, Margaret Mead hypothesized that Americans’ fear of strange foodways accounted for the tasteless foods found in most public eating places. She concluded that the safest preparation for a “mixed group” would be single foods cooked separately with a minimum of seasoning, served individually with condiments on the side.⁷ Booya, on the other hand, is a hodgepodge of meats, vegetables, and seasonings cooked to an unrecognizable paste. In fact, its hallmark is this mysterious quality: “Good booya is just mush. You can—maybe [see] a few kernels of corn or a piece of bean. But no potatoes, no chunks of meat.”⁸ Traditional jokes about pets missing from the neighborhood on booya day and wild-animal tracks stopping right outside the cookshack door acknowledge and play on the anomalous quality of the food. These and more straightforward accounts of undesirable substances supposedly found in the booyas of rival groups—chicken bones, gizzards, or skin—point out that booya flirts with the line that divides order from chaos, purity from danger, edible from inedible. It is therefore not surprising that booya is a highly localized, community-based tradition controlled by well-known and respected members of a given group.

It is difficult to pinpoint the origins of booya. Ephemeral advertisements are rarely archived, and few organizations seem to maintain records of this sort of event. Evidence collected to date shows a cluster of booyas beginning in the 1930s. The North St. Paul Volunteer Firemen’s booya, however, dates to 1922, and informants remember that in northern Minnesota the Vermillion Old Settlers Association hosted booyas at least as early

as the Great Depression. In fact, booya figures prominently in the Depression-era memories of many informants, as well as in the writings from that era of populist-feminist author Meridel LeSueur and in the printings of her brother Mac. The Silver Fox Club, an all-male social group from West 7th Street, a blue-collar neighborhood in St. Paul, began its booya in 1936; the West 7th St. Pleasure Bowling League followed in 1938. That same year the Allied Czech Societies of St. Paul held a booya, but it is unclear whether this was a regular event.⁹

Most people trace booya to the French-Canadian fur traders who supposedly sustained themselves by stewing up vats of whatever wild game and vegetables were on hand. By dubious etymology they claim that the name "booya" is an Anglicized version of the French "bouillir" (to boil).¹⁰ Such speculation aside, living memory dates booya to the late 19th century, when bars along West 7th St. began brewing booya to lure in customers. In fact, a minority of informants, pointing out the food's similarity to goulash, think "booya" is a corruption of an unknown Bohemian word.¹¹ After the turn of the century the food was appropriated by churches, clubs, and other organizations. Today booya is almost always used to raise funds, although occasionally a group of neighbors or a large family will host one, typically for a Fourth of July gathering or family reunion.¹²

The vast majority of booyas are held on summer Sunday afternoons in public parks; a few take place in VFW, church, or fire halls. In St. Paul, for example, the busiest facility is Highland Park, known as "the pavilion that booya built"; six gas-fired kettles are permanently installed in a cookshack and adjacent to a covered area complete with serving counters, concrete floor, and picnic tables. From May through August the pavilion is booked every Sunday for booyas. In North St. Paul the volunteer firemen built and donated to the city a booya building that holds 12 gas-fired vats.¹³

All booyas have the same basic structure, follow the same general rules for preparation, and depend on the same kinds of gender and age divisions of labor. Numerous levels of participation are available to potential booya makers. Men, and to some extent women and children, choose a role depending on their degree of commitment to the endeavor. People assigned to different tasks thus form the substrata of the group of insiders directly responsible for the food. As an event, booya has two distinct components: the preparation and the serving. For the insiders who make the booya, the preparation is the festive social occasion, much more so than the next day when the booya is sold and consumed.

The most apparent and widely shared facet of identity among booya makers is gender: booyas are held and managed by groups of men. The groups may exist for male-only recreation with some community service functions, for family-based recreation, to benefit various church functions,

FORTY-SEVENTH ANNUAL

BOOYA

Given by

**W. 7th St. Pleasure
Bowling League**

**SUNDAY, JULY 28
HIGHLAND PARK**

PRIZES! REFRESHMENTS! MUSIC!

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

COME AND MEET YOUR OLD FRIENDS!

Figure 11-1 Poster, 1985, Taped Inside (Facing Out) a Booya
Maker's Car Window

Telephone poles and store windows are more common
posting places for such advertisement.

*(Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, St.
Paul)*

Figure 11-2 Nicholas D. Coleman (Rear) and Charles Korlath Check the Brew, ca. 1982
Coleman, a state senator for eighteen years, used this powerful image in some of his early campaign literature. Booyas were an important fund-raising tool for Minnesota's Democratic-Farmer Labor Party through the 1970s.
(Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul)



or purely for community service. When members of these male groups gather to make booya, various status rankings become apparent. "Old timers" are revered. They have their pick of the tasks or have the right to show up after the work is in progress simply to socialize. Middle-aged men are expected to carry the full weight of responsibility. The booya chef—the one man nominally in charge, who orders and inspects ingredients, who alone knows the secret recipe for spices, who supervises the process, and who tastes the concoction and pronounces it ready before it is served—this man usually comes from the ranks of the middle-aged. But he has apprenticed with the holder of the recipe, typically his father, father-in-law, or uncle, before the older man became too decrepit to pass it on. Thus he has close ties to the older generation and deep roots in the booya tradition. Young men are welcomed and they work hard at many of the same tasks as the older and middle-aged men, but they are clearly treated as beginners; their work is supervised. Teenaged boys are on the periphery. They may perform a few tasks such as sawing the bones for stock, but mostly they are onlookers. A boy who is 14 or 15 and has a father in the middle ranks may be allowed to spend the night at the pavilion with the booya crew. This rite of passage entitles him to join the ranks of the young men.

Single women do not help out with booya. When women are in attendance, they are the wives of the middle-aged male contingent and, occasionally, their pre-teen daughters. And their tasks as well as their socializing are clearly limited. To the women of St. Francis parish, for example, falls the task of peeling ten pounds of garlic. These women, gathered by the wife of the booya chef, meet at her house two nights before the booya is held. There they share food and wine or beer—and peel garlic. The next day they resume work at the booya pavilion where they peel potatoes while the men chop vegetables. Although they share in the beer and cigarettes, they do not mingle. The women work at a separate picnic table, several tables removed from the men's work.

This separation of the sexes is a prime example of the way in which making booya is a model of community structure. The preparation tasks are by no means assigned according to physical ability or dexterity; rather, the duties are culturally determined. Booya fits the American system wherein men are allowed to cook at outdoor, "roughing it" events—barbecues, picnics, pig roasts—whereas women cook in the home. More specifically, making booya is considered recreation and, among families interviewed for this study, men and women generally socialize in same-sex groups. It comes as no surprise, then, that for an event sponsored by all-male groups, the duties and responsibilities of women are both segregated and circumscribed.

Making booya is a time-consuming task. Starting at about 9:00 a.m. on

Saturday, the day before the event, the vegetables must be cleaned and cut. All are chopped separately and stored, on ice, in metal trash cans lined with plastic garbage bags. Around six o'clock at night water is heated in the 30-gallon kettles. All of the meats are added and cooked at this point. At about midnight, with two men to a kettle, the meat is removed, boned, and returned to the pot. From here on, periodic checks are made for bones. The secret spices, in bags, are added in the night. Around dawn the vegetables and other flavorings go in. From this point on, the booya must be stirred constantly to prevent the potatoes from sticking to the bottom and burning. Around 10:00 a.m. on Sunday the chef begins tasting the booya and adjusting seasonings. Most booyas open to the public at noon, about 24 hours after the men's work began. And most like to claim that they are sold out by 2:00 p.m.

Different organizations handle the nighttime vigil differently. At some, work is done in four-hour shifts by different crews of men. At others, one crew cooks through the night and is relieved at dawn. At very few booyas are women present through the night;¹⁴ night is the time for women to be home supervising the domestic scene. Among those at all familiar with booya, the social side of the nighttime work is well known. In this typically all-male event, beer and stories flow freely, often starting early in the afternoon and continuing at least until dawn. In the words of one fireman, "This is the one occasion that brings us all together. We used to bowl, drink a few beers, play cards. Now people don't have time, or the wives don't like it, or whatever. For this [booya] the retired come back. It's our biggest social function."¹⁵

The booya itself is an entirely different social occasion that emphasizes integration, not separation, of the sexes and ages. Unlike preparing booya, the public part of the event *is* family-oriented, and it is not unusual to see three generations lounging around a picnic table, or families pitching horseshoes, or teenagers gathered around a large radio.

Most people who attend a booya are part of the social network of the hosts. Thus, any given booya is overwhelmingly a neighborhood event, a parish event, or an organizational event. But as such social networks have long tentacles—friends who have moved away maintain neighborhood ties, families bring relatives and friends from the outside, and so forth—it is also a time for broadening and reintegrating community ties.

At the booya, attenders, of course, eat booya. They also have the opportunity to buy beer or soda, candy bars, hot dogs, potato chips; to play carnival-type games like show-down poker; to participate in a raffle; and, occasionally, to dance to a one- or two-piece band. While many people buy gallons of booya to take home and freeze for later consumption, insiders consider it boorish simply to purchase carry-out food. Booyas are meant for

socializing, for mingling and lingering over beers, for spending money on hot dogs and games of chance after the booya is gone.

At the public event, thus, the inclusive side of booya is reasserted for reasons both economic and social. Booya sells for \$1 per bowl, and most people estimate that it costs volunteers 80¢ a bowl to make it. Organizations make most of their profit from beer, candy, and soda sales in addition to the income from games of chance. Therefore, it is better for the host group if people make a day of the event, talking, eating, drinking, and playing games for the entire afternoon.

In addition, booyas are a place and time for entire families to relax and visit with one another. People complain that their pace of life and leisure-time activities make it difficult to assemble the whole family around the dinner table, much less have time to see friends and neighbors with *their* extended families.¹⁶ Booya is a time set aside for such socializing, for putting into practice the value of family and community that informants say they strongly believe but can rarely achieve. People demonstrate their commitment to community by choosing to devote a Sunday afternoon to booya rather than to fishing or watching television, gardening or painting the house. Merely purchasing a few quarts of food at the carry-out line would demonstrate a degree of financial support, but would also imply that other affairs are more important than community. In the words of one man who grew up in the West 7th neighborhood, "Booya is not just a bowlful of stew; it's a celebration that brings together the people. . . . You can't just eat booya. You go to a booya."¹⁷

While booya is all about community, however, it belongs to no one group in particular. Most observers of the tradition, including many who make booya, believe it expresses ethnicity. However, not only is it impossible to prove its French-Canadian origins, but also in St. Paul the "Bohunks on West 7th," "the Krauts on Rice St.,"¹⁸ and the Czechs in South St. Paul all proudly claim booya as their own. And even this ethnic characterization is a gross overstatement, as the so-called West 7th Bohunks, for example, include Irish, Germans, and French Canadians within their ranks. The Finns and Slavs in northern Minnesota also participate in the rivalry over whose booya is best. And, furthermore, the suburban volunteer fire companies have members from a variety of backgrounds. Ethnicity is not even a salient factor in their group identity.

Nor can booya be tied to any single locale. Enthusiasts stoutly argue that theirs is a purely Minnesotan food. In fact, a South St. Paul florist, formerly a rodeo director, has undertaken a one-man crusade to add booya to the roster of state symbols. In 1985, for the third consecutive year, he organized an Annual World Booya Championship Contest, hoping, actually, to spread the gospel of booya statewide!¹⁹ In the process of promoting

these events, it came to light that the Belgians and French Canadians of Green Bay, Wisconsin, also make something they call "booyah." There followed a nasty exchange of brags and name-calling in the hometown newspapers, in which loyalists sought to impugn the authenticity and quality of their rival's products, that ended abruptly when Wisconsin backed out of bringing its booya to the contest.²⁰ The fact that booyas also exist in Canada also confounds Minnesota's claim to the foodway, although the tradition is clearly confined to a fairly limited region of North America.

But even in Minnesota booya exists only in isolated pockets, in particular neighborhoods of particular cities in particular regions of the state. At first glance it appears to be an urban tradition, and even so, as far as research can show, booyas are only held in the metropolitan Minneapolis-St. Paul area and several hundred miles north, in the small towns in Minnesota's iron-mining district. In fact, class, more than anything else, seems to be the common denominator of booya, which flourishes in blue-collar neighborhoods and working-class Catholic parishes. Iron Range towns in northern Minnesota exhibit many urban characteristics precisely because they were established to house the workers of heavy industry; they are unlike Minnesota's rural small towns where booya is an unknown phenomenon.²¹ Yet it is important to note that class is not stated as a salient factor for participants in the tradition. Rather, as mentioned above, communities that host booyas define themselves in terms of ethnicity, neighborhood, interest group, and so forth.

In any case, the shared traits of being workers in Minnesota do not work to forge much sense of community among members of these two regional groups. Instead, booya becomes a focus for rivalries between these two, re-expressing longstanding regional prides and hostilities wherein Twin Citians refer to the rest of the state as "out-state" with all the implications of being backward, unsophisticated, and quaint, while Iron Rangers hold Twin Citians in contempt for their supposedly soft and favored existence, skimming the cream off of state programs. For example, when a native St. Paul newspaperman ventured to say in print that "Folks on the Iron Range occasionally sup of something called 'booyeh' that may be similar"²² [to St. Paul's], an angry Iron Range resident replied:

The St. Paul variety is surely a far cry from the original. The voyageurs couldn't lay hands on those exotic ingredients such as pickling spices, parsley, garlic, etc. I don't know where they got that recipe, but unlike their recipe, which many dislike, I don't know anyone who has tasted the Iron Range Booyah who doesn't say it is utterly delicious. And the cost of our booyah is a great deal less than St. Paul's.²³

Within the Twin Cities, St. Paul, which has the reputation of being the more ethnic, neighborhood-oriented of the two, hosts numerous booyas. Across the river in Minneapolis, the city that bills itself as "the Minneapple" and projects a cosmopolitan, cultured image, residents are largely ignorant of booya.²⁴ Yet even in St. Paul booyas exist only in isolated pockets, mostly in solid working-class neighborhoods of varying ethnicities. Catholicism is the predominant religion in these areas, but it is not correct to say that booya is a Catholic epiphenomenon, because booyas held outside of these neighborhoods show no such affiliation. Although the working-class link does not figure in community self-definition, it is important from an analytical standpoint, especially when considering that residents of the middle-class Macalester neighborhood, less than two miles from West 7th, hardly know of booya. And residents of the equally middle-class Highland area, which coincidentally houses the park pavilion where most of St. Paul's booyas occur, rarely if ever attend these events that are in, but definitely not of, their neighborhood and community.

The foregoing discussion briefly outlines the basic contours of the booya tradition. Examples of the annual booyas held by the parish of St. Francis de Sales and by the North St. Paul Volunteer Fire Department clearly demonstrate how specific communities use and adapt the generic tradition, making it a powerful medium for enacting and expressing a sense of community. The settings for these two booyas differ; the church is located in the heart of the booya belt in the West 7th St. neighborhood, while the fire company is in a late nineteenth-century town that has become a suburb of St. Paul. Likewise, the nature of the groups or premises for joining them are very different. The church has built a family-based community grounded in shared spiritual beliefs and strengthened through the continuity of generations of the same families from the same neighborhood regularly interacting at sacred and secular functions. The fire company, on the other hand, is composed only of men who volunteer a portion of their time for a specialized kind of community service. Membership is based on individual commitment to an ideal. The community they serve is a political entity, much broader than the social or cultural groups to which individual firemen belong. These men may not know the people they will help, nor, in that case, do they expect to establish relationships with their "clients."

St. Francis de Sales

The West 7th St. neighborhood in which the church is located is best characterized as a solid, stable, blue-collar enclave. "You have your upward mobility, but not here. Here people stay. Generations . . . families live in the same house or block. People might move away, but they come back."²⁵

Cross-cut by railroad tracks and a freeway, bounded by downtown St. Paul to the east, the Mississippi River more or less to the south, the site of the Schmidt brewery, oil-storage tanks, a power plant, and numerous auto repair garages, second-hand stores, and small businesses, the neighborhood is one of St. Paul's oldest. Many men grew up there to work on street construction crews, for the railroad, meat-packing houses, or in trade unions as machinists, welders, assemblers, electricians, and the like. As in many traditional communities, women did not work outside of the home until fairly recently. In addition to churches of several Protestant denominations, the neighborhood houses three Catholic churches: St. Francis, originally the German parish; St. James, originally Irish; and St. Stanislaus, originally Bohemian (mostly Czech). Today church membership is mixed; people have been known to transfer allegiances among the three, but generally they stay with the family parish, a choice originally based on ethnicity and proximity to the church building. All three of the churches have held booyas; of them, St. Francis's is the most visible.²⁶

The men and women of St. Francis make about 300 gallons of booya for their church picnic; theirs is the recipe quoted earlier in this article. Parish members can not date when the church began holding booyas; they speculate that the tradition goes back about 60 years. Since the late 1940s or early 1950s when Highland Park Pavilion was built, they have always used that facility.

The preparation process follows the age and gender rules listed above: the women gather in a home to peel garlic on Friday night and execute different tasks from the men's on Saturday at the Highland Pavilion. Youth has a special role at this booya; the son of one participant saws beef bones with a hacksaw under the supervision of an "old-timer." His is perhaps the most physically demanding job. Joe McDonough, the chef, oversees the work and takes "a lot of guff," both serious complaints from choppers about the quality of the vegetables, and light-hearted (the usual: "Hey Joe, someone's wondering where his cat is"). McDonough inherited the recipe from his father, who got it from Jim Kane, a janitor at St. James Church. While the amounts and kinds of vegetables and meats are a matter of public record, no one, not even his wife, knows the ingredients that flavor the mix. St. Francis booya makers credit him, aided of course by the recipe, for their superior booya. McDonough cooks the chicken in separate pots, "lets it settle, degreases the broth, and then just puts in stock. That way you're not picking out skin and bone."²⁷ This and the preparation of beef stock from bones is all accomplished before 6:00 p.m. mass. Thereafter, crews of men begin taking four-hour shifts, cooking the meats together, and adding the vegetables in proper sequence. Around 3:30 a.m. McDonough returns with the secret spices all mixed in a cloth bag.

The nighttime vigil is a social occasion that the men enjoy despite its grueling aspects. Crowding into a small outbuilding with six large, hot kettles of booya, constantly stirring massive amounts of thick, heavy food on a humid August night has strenuous moments. The old-timers tend to step back and let the middle-aged or younger men handle the toughest physical labor. But the work draws them together, and the vast amount of not-yet-finished booya, the reason for their gathering, is put to good use. The men float cobs of corn or polish sausage in the vats, and these snacks absorb some of the flavor and aroma of the brew. Thus, on this special occasion, the men share not only the beer, jokes, and stories that might be part of their everyday social interactions, but also ordinary food made special for, and because of, their participation in making booya.

The nature of the longstanding and intertwined family-neighborhood ties and traditional age and gender roles that characterize the church community make joining the inner circle of booya makers a slow and difficult, almost organic, process. The church, of course, welcomes new members. And the booya makers nominally encourage participation: many hands make light work. But newcomers get no closer than the Saturday-afternoon vegetable chopping for many years. In 1985, for example, one man, aged about 30, attended the afternoon session, but when the vegetables were all chopped and the workers pushed back from the tables, lit up cigarettes, and poured themselves more beer, he got up to leave. After his departure the old-timers and women spent considerable time trying to remember his name, place his face, and relate him to a known family.

At the booya on Sunday the principle of inclusion, or the larger community spirit, ascends. Booya makers mingle with the crowd. The men who stand behind the sale counters or circulate throughout the park retrieving trays and discarding empty bowls and plasticware wear no identifying clothing or buttons. The occasion is a parish picnic, attended also by close friends and neighbors of churchgoers. Outside of the church, word of the upcoming booya travels informally. Posters are not widely distributed or conspicuously displayed. As with most booyas, "People *know* when the booya is on. Word gets out—"The men are working at the booya. It's gonna be this weekend.'"²⁸

In fact, the event highlights a larger-than-parish sense of community, owing to the fact that West 7th recognizes and presents itself as a solid booya enclave. Yet within it, the booya tradition is decentralized. Various groups hold booyas to raise funds for sundry, specialized purposes: church and ethnic fraternal organizations, recreational equipment, club operating funds, and so on. Many of the men of St. Francis belong to other social and recreational groups in the neighborhood. Thus, while rivalry exists about whose booya is best, membership in different organizations does not sug-

gest a conflict. Members of the Silver Fox Club or West 7th St. Pleasure Bowling League, for example, come to the St. Francis booya because they like the food and because they or their friends also belong to the church.

These same people who may go to three different booyas in the span of eight weeks, however, do not attend those held outside of the neighborhood. People are well aware of other booya traditions; they volunteer information that Rice St. booya is greasy or the booya in North St. Paul is made in such quantity that it is thin (it is not), but this talk has the quality of legend. No one will admit to attending these other events; they simply have heard all the facts about the inferiority of the product outside the borders of their neighborhood community.

Thus, the annual St. Francis parish booya is a clear expression of both personal and group identity, of community on several levels that, like an inverted pyramid, grow ever broader or more inclusive. The unstated rules and roles for making booya model traditional family structure and values. The actual process of making booya enacts and reinforces these divisions, but it also draws participants together, forging a sense of group identity based on shared traditions and activity, family, neighborhood, and church membership. And attending the booya is, most of all, a powerful expression of community built on family, religion, friendship, and neighborhood allegiance: "You can't make a little of it. You can't make it yourself. It's all from one big pot. Everyone shares."²⁹

North St. Paul

In North St. Paul the picture is somewhat different. Although the area today has become a suburb of St. Paul, it was founded in the late 1880s as a separate entity. "The town rose virtually overnight . . . to a bustling town containing more than a dozen factories."³⁰ Several decades later twenty-seven factories graced the area, ranging from several iron works and a brick company to furniture, piano, and casket manufacturers. A fire in 1933 destroyed much of the town.³¹ The suburban appearance and aspects of North St. Paul are more prominent today than in 1922 when the volunteer fire company began holding booyas.

Change and mobility are themes that run through conversations with the volunteer firemen, whether they are discussing the community or their booya. Currently, people who live in the town may not work there. Likewise, people who now live there did not necessarily grow up in that area. Members of the fire department include men originally from Minneapolis, northern Minnesota, and even Chicago. These men—tradesmen and professionals—come from a variety of ethnic and religious cultures.

Volunteer firemen, of necessity, are derived from the immediate com-

munity, and their desire to join is motivated by several ideals: "It's the social function . . . and the chance to help with no commitment, no responsibility. If I get a fire call or an ambulance call, I go out, do my thing, and walk away from it. That's all. I don't need thanks. I've got the satisfaction, and that's it. It's over."³² The larger community that the group serves is, in some ways, abstract. There need be no personal ties. Yet the group itself, formed for community service, does fulfill social needs for its members, some of whom join specifically as a means of establishing a sense of community in a new place.

This booya, like St. Francis's, follows the general pattern of age and gender role separation. The booya, however, is twice as big, filling thirteen kettles and totaling about 700 gallons. The nighttime stirring is handled by one crew—the same men who clean the permanently installed kettles. As in the West 7th neighborhood, nighttime is the prime social time: "A lot of the old-timers come back, sit around, drink a beer, and bull. It's real nice."³³ In North St. Paul, however, the old-timers and even middle-aged men ruminate frequently on changes in their tradition, rather than continuity. Before the department built and donated to the city its current pavilion in a park in 1981, the booya had been held in at least three different parks. The men cooked over wood fires in canvas tents, and, although all involved are pleased at the relative ease of using stationary kettles and gas flames, several people maintain that the booya flavor suffers without the wood smoke.

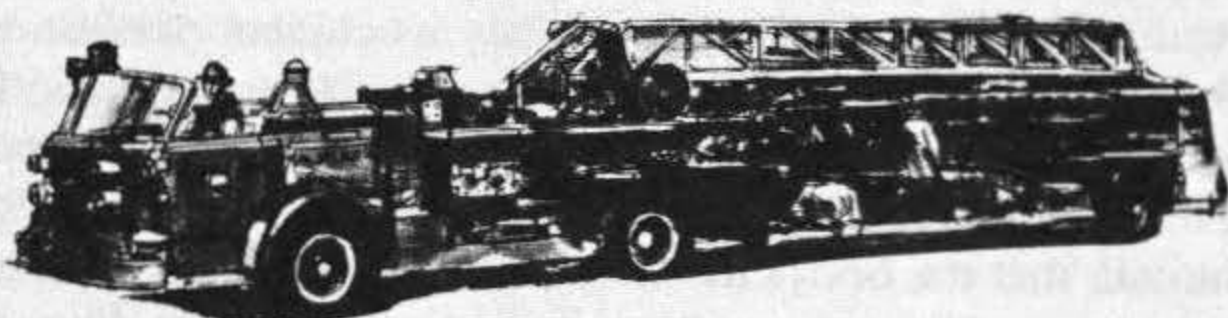
Over the years, booya ingredients have become more divorced from the community. Firewood used to be donated; vegetables at one time were all locally grown garden produce, except for the potatoes which were grown by the treasurer's relative about forty miles north of town. Currently the treasurer purchases all ingredients from a produce wholesaler and a meat market.

Perhaps the most discussed change, however, is the nature of female participation in the event. On Saturday afternoon, in the North St. Paul firehouse, a handful of women and young girls sit in a circle spatially segregated from the men's work just as at the St. Francis booya. Their sole task is to string and snap green beans. In 1985, there were too few women to complete the task in time; a young boy began cutting beans, but did so on the tables where the men were working. Asked about this discontinuity, one fireman replied: "Yeah. Used to be about a dozen women would be sitting around cutting beans, talking about whatever women talk about. And the men were real chauvinistic. Wouldn't cut 'em [the beans]. 'That's women's work!' Well, now the women would just say 'Sh—[doesn't complete the word].' You can read lips, can't you? . . ."³⁴

Other commentary reveals the firemen's booya to be a microcosm of social change. "Used to be the backbone, the Ladies' Auxiliary. Now things

NORTH ST. PAUL

FIREMEN'S BOOYA

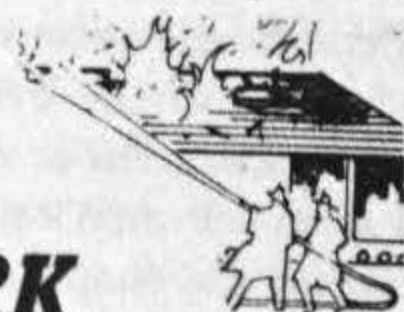


SUNDAY SEPT. 7 1986

**SERVING STARTS
AT NOON!**



CASEY LAKE PARK



REFRESHMENTS — BAKE SALE

Figure 11-3. Booya Advertisement Posted Near the Entrance to Casey Lake Park.
(Collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul)

are different.”³⁵ According to department members, the wives of the younger firemen who have replaced the retired older generation of volunteers either work outside the home or have other commitments that preclude participation in the booya. In addition to preparing beans, women used to make pies and cakes; their auxiliary ran a bake sale at the booya. “Now we hardly have any, and it looks bad . . . I think it’s better to have nothing than just a little.”³⁶ The cookies and bars which women currently donate are easier to prepare than pies and cakes and possibly bespeak less time for commitment.

The social changes affecting the lives of the firemen as well as the nature and composition of the department makes the annual booya an especially significant event for members. As in other organizations that host booyas, the recipe is a secret part of the tradition that binds this group. In North St. Paul the lineage of recipe holders encompasses two families: William Weber, who started the booya, retired in the late 1950s or early 1960s and passed the secret spice combination on to his son-in-law. That man died young, and the recipe went to Weber’s son, who is currently on the verge of retirement. “Who he’s passing it on to, we don’t know.”³⁷ It is interesting to note that the department members cherish and respect the secrecy of the spice ingredients. The formula, for safekeeping, is locked in a bank safe-deposit box. “We could go look, but we choose not to. It’s kind of a little tradition. Everyone needs traditions, you know.”³⁸

Advertising for the North St. Paul booya is a broader-spectrum affair than in the West 7th St. neighborhood. Rather than relying on posters in the windows of community businesses, in recent years the event has been announced over local radio, and, in 1985, on cable television. People are said to come from many of St. Paul’s northern suburbs, but never from the city’s well-known booya neighborhoods. The fact that all 700 gallons are usually sold within three hours attests to the success of the advertising.

At the booya, the firemen are clearly identified by their uniforms, including name tags. This garb is probably necessary to mark them as hosts, since people who attend the booya are not necessarily friends and neighbors who will recognize those in charge. In fact, in contrast to the St. Francis booya, this one, although it is a longstanding North St. Paul tradition, no longer serves as a community social event. “We try to make it a family day. People used to sit around and socialize more. People of today—I guess we’re just in too fast a world—they just buy it and go. A few do stay, but not like they used to.”³⁹

Department members cite various reasons for this state of affairs. Some say that the booya sells out so fast that there is nothing to stay for. Others claim that since there are few or no games (these are a costly risk to rent if little participation is expected) and not much of a bake sale, there is

nothing to tempt people to stay.⁴⁰ Still others claim that people prefer to buy vast quantities of booya and freeze it for use in cooler weather.⁴¹ Whatever the reasons may be, the booya sells rapidly, but the attractive picnic grounds facing the lake are sparsely populated.

The nature and mission of the sponsoring group perhaps explains why this booya succeeds better as a fundraiser than as a social event. The community that the firemen serve is the entire city of North St. Paul, an abstract political entity rather than a personalized group of friends. The funds they raise go to the firemen's relief association general fund, to fire prevention posters, prizes for the city's Junior Fire Marshal program, to support civic doings like the Lions Club fishing contest and the local American Legion, to host regional firemen's meetings, to supply the fire station with beer and soda, to make donations to the city's athletic association, send flowers to funerals of past members, condolence and get-well cards, presents, and the like. The department spent \$22,000 alone on the booya shelter which residents of the city may use throughout the year as a park building. "Everything has basically gone back into the city one way or another."⁴²

The booya makers themselves, on the other hand, derive and reinforce a sense of community through their participation in the tradition. Membership in the department is a way for men to foster and share a sense of community in what they perceive as a highly mobile society where traditional values are in flux. Participating in the company booya intensifies their commitment to the group and their ties to its past. The North St. Paul Volunteer Firemen's booya is a totally different kind of social occasion set in a very different community context than the St. Francis parish event. Each group has shaped the generic booya tradition into a clear expression of its contemporary sense of self.

Notes

1. *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 6, 1981, p. 1B; *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, December 8, 1984, p. 1B.
2. For a discussion of the social role of such organizations in promoting the consumption of foods not on grocery shelves, see Simon Bronner, *Grasping Things* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1986), Chapter 4 *passim*.
3. What constitutes "exotic," of course, is a matter of opinion. To members of other booya traditions, both the garlic and pickling spices mentioned above are offensive and too esoteric, respectively; Betty Wiljamaa to Editor, *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 27, 1984, p. 12A; interview of Howard Anderson, North St. Paul, August 8, 1985; interview of Ron Ritchie, North St. Paul, September 8, 1985.
4. Interviews of Arnie Leitner, Joe McDonough, and Joe Reichert (St. Francis de Sales Church), St. Paul, August 10, 1985; Frank Lewis, North St. Paul, September 8, 1985; *St. Paul Dispatch*, September 25, 1984, p. B1; Cathy Barton, "It's Nothing But a Big Bowl

- of Soup!': Kentucky Burgoo and the Burgoo Supper," *Kentucky Folklore Record* 24 (July–December, 1978): 110.
5. In fact, new communities begin to hold booyas from time to time. The Apple Valley Volunteer fire company's event is only in its ninth year, and the tiny town of Finland, located about six miles west of Lake Superior in northern Minnesota, attempted its first "Harvest Booya and Finn Fest" in 1985. Booya came to Finland through a former resident of St. Paul, who decided the food would be a welcome addition to the annual harvest party. The recipe was obtained from a man in South St. Paul who has been cooking booya for forty years.
6. Insiders tell jokes about how outsiders are puzzled by or sadly misconstrue the meaning of the name, thinking, for example, that the posters advertise a new dance craze, a terrorist group, or point to a taxidermist's: Body A (a misreading of a hand-lettered sign); *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, December 8, 1984, p. 1B; *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, February 22, 1973, p. 19.
7. Margaret Mead, "The Problem of Changing Food Habits," in Committee on Food Habits, *The Problem of Changing Food Habits* (Washington, D.C.: National Research Council Bulletin No. 108, Oct., 1943).
8. Here to end of paragraph interview of Arnie Leitner, St. Paul, August 10, 1985; interview of Patrick Coleman, St. Paul, July 3, 1985; Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); Roger Abrahams, "Equal Opportunity Eating: A Structural Excursus on Things of the Mouth," in *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the United States: The Performances of Group Identity*, Linda Keller Brown and Kay Mussell, eds. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1984): 19–36.
9. Meridel Le Sueur, *The Girl*, reprint ed. (Minneapolis: West End Press and MEP Publications, 1982); Mac Le Sueur, "Untitled," painting ca. 1934–41; Allied Czech Societies of St. Paul, poster, Joseph Pavlicek Papers, Immigration History Research Center, St. Paul; West 7th St. Pleasure Bowling League, poster, collections of the Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; *The Community Reporter* (St. Paul), July, 1984, p. 3.
10. In fact, booyas are held in Canada's Ottawa Valley. The food and form of the event are different, but the communal base is consistent. Neighbors donate chickens to be raffled, and at the end of the raffle all fowl is stewed in a common pot and shared. I am indebted to I. Sheldon Posen for this information.
11. This theory appears to be the weaker of the two. Mrs. B. A. Ebert of LeCenter, Minnesota contributed a family recipe to a cookbook with the information that "a top favorite would be the Booya, or 'Vomachka' as we Bohemians call it [my emphasis] made from the gizzards and hearts of ducks"; Virginia Huck and Ann H. Andersen, *100 Years of Good Cooking* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society, 1958): 92.
12. Interview of Gene Gagner, St. Paul, July 28, 1985; Patrick Coleman, St. Paul, July 3, 1985.
13. Interview of Howard Anderson, North St. Paul, August 8, 1985; St. Paul Park System Record Books for 1985; *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 6, 1981, p. 1B.
14. Women do participate in the night vigil at the West 7th St. Pleasure Bowling League's and the Sokol Minnesota's (a Czech organization) booyas. Both of these groups stress that they are family oriented, clearly cognizant of their anomalous status within the

- tradition. Interviews of Gene Gagner and Brenda S., St. Paul, July 28, 1985; John Carl Hancock, Minneapolis, January 15, 1986.
15. Interview of Frank Lewis, North St. Paul, September 7, 1985.
 16. See, for example, interviews of Gene Gagner, July 28, 1985; Nicholas J. Coleman, September 26, 1985; Dominic Cincotta, September 8, 1985.
 17. Nicholas J. Coleman, in *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 6, 1981, p. 1B.
 18. Interview of Robert Hess, St. Paul, August 2, 1985.
 19. *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, August 26, 1984, p. 4B.
 20. *St. Paul Pioneer Press*, September 25, 1984, p. B1.
 21. In this vein, however, it is curious that booya is also unknown in the city of Duluth, which perfectly fits the profile of a locale for the event. It will be interesting to discover whether the Finland booya takes root.
 22. *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 6, 1981, p. 5B.
 23. Betty Wiljamaa to Editor, *Minneapolis Tribune*, September 27, 1981, p. 12A.
 24. Like most popular generalizations on booya, this one is not entirely correct. In the Minneapolis suburb of St. Anthony Village, the parish of St. Charles Boromel held booyas in the 1940s, and in nearby suburban New Brighton, St. John the Baptist Church has a vigorous booya tradition. Both parishes are composed of an ethnically mixed population which migrated out of the city's northeast, largely working-class, neighborhoods. I am indebted to Mark Haidet of the Minnesota Historical Society for this information.
 25. Interview of Gene Gagner, St. Paul, July 28, 1985.
 26. Connie X., for example, recently joined St. Stanislaus but continues to help cook for the St. Francis booya, as she has for twenty-five years; interview, August 10, 1985. St. Francis actually hosts two booyas per season, one as its parish picnic and the other, held by the Casinos, a men's club in the church, to benefit the church's athletic fund. This paper focuses on the parish event, which is more broadly representative of the community.
 27. Connie X., August 10, 1985. She is contrasting St. Francis booya with others that do not use a stock but put all meats directly into the booya pot.
 28. Interview of Nicholas J. Coleman, September 26, 1985.
 29. Ibid.
 30. North St. Paul Coordinating Committee, *Bicentennial Celebration, Souvenir Edition* (North St. Paul: The Committee, 1976): 2.
 31. Linda Olson, *An Abbreviated History of the Community of North St. Paul*, n.p., n.d.
 32. Interview of Frank Lewis, September 7, 1985.
 33. Interview of Ron Ritchie, September 7, 1985.
 34. Interview of Ray Z., September 7, 1985.
 35. Interview of Frank Lewis, September 7, 1985.
 36. Interview of Dominic Cincotta, September 7, 1985.

37. Interview of Frank Lewis, September 7, 1985.
38. Here and the quote below, interview of Howard Anderson, fire chief, August 8, 1985.
39. Interview of Ron Ritchie, September 8, 1985. Ritchie has ties to West 7th through marriage and claims that although he has been to city booyas, none of the West 7th folk will ever come to his.
40. Interview of Howard Anderson, August 8, 1985.
41. Interview of Dominic Cincotta, September 8, 1985.
42. In fact, booya is so popular among deer hunters that the firemen hold a smaller booya in October strictly so hunters can stock up. At this latter event booya is sold only to carry out. Interview of Howard Anderson, August 8, 1985.